

Ever further from the West: why Ankara looks to Moscow

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Ever Further from the West: Why Ankara Looks to Moscow

Günter Seufert

A bloody coup attempt, the government responding by dismantling the state of law and an unending series of terror attacks have turned Turkey into a different country. In foreign policy, Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow raises the question of whether the West can still consider Turkey a reliable partner. Officially, the country continues to be a candidate for membership of the European Union. However, for some time now the talk has been more of the dangers that an unstable and anti-Western Turkey creates for the EU than of how Brussels might influence Turkish politics. NATO too is concerned about Turkey. Will it remain in the Western camp? Can it recover domestically? What sort of future do the more recent developments in foreign and domestic policy predict for Turkey?

In the past few weeks, Turkey has seemed to score one foreign-policy victory after another. The truce in Syria, which it negotiated along with Russia in the last days of 2016, was met with a positive reaction by the United Nations Security Council, emphasising once again that Turkey is key to finding a solution to the conflict. This strengthens Ankara's position vis-à-vis the United States. It can now put increased pressure on Kurdish organisations in Syria and Iraq, which have been supported by the US in fighting Islamic State (IS) in Syria since 2013, but which are also closely linked to the Kurdistan Workers party (PKK).

More Room for Manoeuvre in Syria and Iraq

As part of their Euphrates Shield Operation, launched in August 2016, regular Turkish units and groups from the so-called Free Syrian Army have driven IS fighters from a band of territory in northern Syria some 40 km wide. On 28 and 29 December, Turkish ground troops directly cooperated with the Russian air force for the first time, demonstrating to the US that Turkey has an alternative to American air support. At the same time, the Turkish government floated the idea of barring the US from using its Incirlik military base because the US cooperates with the Kurdish-Syrian militias of the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Both of these moves drive up the

price that Washington would have to pay if it allowed the Kurdish-Syrian militias to unite the areas they control in northern Syria and thus build a “Kurdish corridor” on Turkey’s southern border.

During his visit to Iraq on 6 and 7 January 2017, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım promised to withdraw Turkish units from Baschiqa, west of Mosul. This had been a longstanding demand of the Iraqi government. Yıldırım also confirmed the territorial integrity of Iraq, which Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had repeatedly called into question in 2016 by referring to former possessions of the Ottoman Empire and the right to autonomy of Iraq’s Turkmen. Yıldırım’s concessions have secured a promise from the Iraqi government to take action against PKK fighters in its Sinjar Mountains. The PKK has drawn on a local ethnic group in that mountainous region, the Kurdish Yazidis, to form its own militias.

Turkey’s Middle East policy: A Grand Design ...

Given the awkward situation that Turkey has created for itself in the Middle East, its rapprochement with Moscow comes as no surprise. Whilst in 2011 Turkey was still being praised by the West as a model for the future of the Islamic world, the Arab Spring has now turned the reference points of Turkey’s foreign policy upside down. Until then, the country had successfully reconciled Islamic identity and democracy. Moreover, it acted as a credible mediator in the Middle East who was seen as being above the political, ethnic, religious and denominational rifts that crisscross the region. In those years, Turkey normalised its relationship with Kurdistan-Iraq, had good relations with both Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq, mediated between Syria and Israel, and reached a compromise deal on Iran’s nuclear programme in tandem with Brazil (whose implementation has admittedly floundered because of US opposition).

The Arab Spring torpedoed Turkey’s strategy of finding common ground with the Middle East’s authoritarian rulers. It laid bare not only the weakness of the region’s secular authoritarian regimes, but also the potential for mobilisation of its Sunni Islamic movements. The various strands of the Muslim Brotherhood looked poised to be the crucial political forces in the Middle East.

Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) is strongly Islamic-conservative as well. Its founding cadres were (and are) known for their ideological proximity to the Muslim Brothers. During the AKP’s long and uninterrupted reign (since 2002), the perception of state and nation within Turkish society has changed. Memories of the size and might of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the region for 500 years, have been revived. From about 2013 onwards, the AKP relativized the regime’s secularity. Its previously clear-cut focus on the EU and NATO took second place to the idea of Turkey dominating the Middle East.

Globally, the signs were favourable for a revaluation of Turkey as well. The US was preparing to reduce its presence in the Middle East, which Turkey took as an invitation to think about assuming a leading role itself. The only requirements seemed to be for Ankara to lend a hand to the Sunni-Islamic popular movements in neighbouring states and for the movements to assume the responsibilities of government there.

... but meagre results

It did not turn out that way. The Islamic Al-Nahda Party’s success at the urns in Tunisia was only temporary, and Libya became mired in civil war. The decisive developments, however, occurred in Egypt and Syria. They not only put an end to Ankara’s dream of hegemony in the Middle East, but also alienated Turkey from the West.

The Egyptian military’s coup d’état against the Muslim-Brotherhood government on 7 March 2013 was the first setback with far-reaching consequences. Turkey

condemned as a betrayal of the ideals of democracy the fact that Western states, most notably the US, accepted the putsch and even continued to cooperate with the military government. For Erdoğan, this was also proof that the West consents to the overthrow of elected governments wherever that sidelines the representatives of the Muslim masses. Was this not a good reason to fear that the West would also tolerate – or even welcome – the removal of his own government? After the putsch in Egypt, the view came to prevail in Ankara that the protests around Istanbul's Gezi Park, which had just been violently put down, were essentially an attempted putsch by pro-Western forces. Since then, the government has resorted to this interpretation whenever it faces a political problem.

Turkey broke with Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad later than the US and European states did, but then it pushed for arming the Muslim opposition earlier and more energetically than they did. In 2013, differences emerged between Washington and Ankara over which parts of the Islamic opposition should be labelled jihadists and/or terrorists. In the US, these differences of opinion fanned criticism that had emerged some time earlier and fundamentally opposed Obama's policy of cooperating with moderate Muslim movements. This fuelled concerns in Ankara that the West wanted to damage the ruling party.

Disagreement over the role of the Syrian Kurds was soon added to the mix. The Kurdish militias had become the US's most powerful partner against IS. Ankara accused Washington of promoting terrorism. In turn, the US reproached Turkey with refusing to provide active support for the war against IS for a long time; making light of the existence of jihadist cells in Turkey; and failing to prevent increasing numbers of so-called foreign fighters joining IS by establishing tighter border controls. Simultaneously there were growing protests in Europe against Ankara's policy on the Kurds and on human rights.

By early 2016, Turkey had backed itself into a hopeless corner. It had become the common adversary of states that represent antithetical interests in the Middle East. Its Syria policy had turned it into an opponent of the regimes in Damascus, Tehran and Moscow. Its conflict with Israel had not been settled yet. Allowing Iraqi Kurds to directly export their oil despite Baghdad's opposition worsened Turkey's relations with Iraq. Its relationship with Cairo had been at a low point ever since the military coup there. The fact that Riyadh not only bailed out the putschists financially but also declared the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation put a strain on Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States.

It was in November 2015 that Ankara finally overstepped the mark. Turkish jets downed a Russian warplane that had violated Turkish airspace. Moscow imposed economic sanctions and closed Syrian airspace for Turkish planes, causing great difficulty for the rebels supported by Ankara. Overthrowing Assad was now out of the question. At the same time, the risk grew that the Kurds might unite the territories they held in north-eastern and north-western Syria, sealing Turkey off from the Middle East.

A change in direction had become inevitable. In late June, Ankara ceased its demands that Israel lift its maritime blockade of Gaza, which until then had been Turkey's condition for resuming diplomatic relations with Tel Aviv. In the same month, Erdoğan also apologised to Putin for the downing of the Russian jet.

Radical Realism and Ideological Amnesia

However painful the associated U-turn might be for the Turkish government, its conciliation with Russia has enabled it to make a radical shift in its Syria policy. This reorientation has probably been expressed most clearly in the joint declaration agreed by Russia, Iran and Turkey on 20 December

2016 in Moscow. In it, they affirm “their full respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, democratic and secular state”. The three governments signalled their commitment to act as “guarantors of a prospective agreement” to be negotiated “between the Syrian government and the opposition” and stressed their determination to “fight jointly against IS and Al-Nusra”.

All the goals of Turkey’s previous Syria policy have thus been reversed. Its ruler Assad is recognised as a negotiating partner. By agreeing to a secular Syria, Ankara has let go of the idea of bringing the neighbouring state under Muslim Brotherhood rule. And the Al-Nusra Front (now known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), which had been supported time and again by Turkey, has been ranked alongside IS as a terrorist organisation. All of this is likely to significantly lessen Ankara’s prestige with the Sunni Islamic opposition and thus deprive Turkey of its most important lever within Syria.

The events of 5 December 2016 illustrate how bitter its U-turn must taste to Ankara. On that day, following heavy Russian and Syrian bombardment, Assad’s military began retaking Aleppo. Aleppo is not only Syria’s largest city, but also a Sunni-rebel stronghold and the centre of Turkish-Ottoman heritage in Syria. On 5 December, Russia and China used their veto to prevent the UN Security Council from calling on the parties to the conflict to agree to an immediate ceasefire. And on the very day that this decisive bastion of Turkey’s Syria policy was recaptured with Russian assistance, the Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım made his pilgrimage to Moscow where he hoped to get the continued sanctions lifted, so as to reinstate visa-free travel for Turks, for instance. In Moscow, Yıldırım promised Russia close military and intelligence cooperation. Only a few months earlier, Turkish newspapers close to the government were still claiming that Russia was waging a war on Muslims and Islam.

Foreign Policy: From the Party to the State

Syria has now entirely slipped beyond Turkey’s influence. Nothing is left of the successes of the first decade of this century when Ankara tied Syria to it with a plethora of agreements, reciprocal visa exemption, a free-trade deal, joint cabinet meetings and military and political cooperation. Syria was supposed to be Turkey’s gateway to the Arab world. That dream of Turkish hegemony over the Middle East is now over. The foreign policy pursued by the AKP, which centred on the dream, is being buried.

The ruling party’s foreign policy is being replaced by the “old” foreign policy of the Turkish state. This is not shaped by grand visions, but by security concerns, primarily the fear of Kurdish separatism. Its top priorities are, first, to prevent the Kurdish territories of Kobane in north-eastern and Afrin in north-western Syria from uniting and then to demolish the autonomous structures that have been set up there. Both circles close to the government and extreme nationalists are now calling for the necessary operations to be launched against the towns of Kobane, Manbij and Afrin.

So far, the West has not been supportive of such a policy. The US grants the Syrian Kurds too important a role in fighting IS, and it is probably too interested in holding the bridgeheads established there as well. Even Turkish commentators who are critical of their government assume that the US will not give up the lever in Syria that the Kurds represent, seeing that Syria will continue to be dominated by Russia and Iran. Hence Ankara is looking to Moscow. The incursion of Turkish troops into northern Syria as part of Operation Euphrates Shield – which is aimed at least as much against the Syrian Kurdish PYD as it is against IS – was only made possible by conciliation with Russia. Moscow de facto opened Syrian airspace for Turkish jets, and its tacit consent ensured that Damascus responded to the Turkish intrusion only with verbal protests.

Ever Further from the West

Turkey's about-turn is its response to the end of the Arab Spring and the failure of its Middle East policy. However, the fact that this change in direction is taking the shape of a rapprochement with Moscow is primarily a consequence of American policy. It will continue for as long as Washington's stance on the Kurds remains unchanged. There are no signs that Turkey is shedding its fixation with the PKK and the Kurds as the supposedly biggest threat to Turkish statehood or that it is considering returning to the negotiating table. If Turkey had been able to change its mindset and envisage political integration and partnership with the Kurds, it would have contacted the PYD while the peace negotiations with the PKK were still ongoing. Turkey would then have influenced the PKK through the PYD and tried to win over the Syrian Kurds as an additional force against Assad.

But in Ankara's current perception, US policy directly targets Turkey's security interests. The Turkish government and press are doing everything in their power to anchor this image in the minds of the population. In late December 2016, Erdoğan went so far as to claim he had proof that the US even provided assistance to IS – as long as it was fighting Turkey. And after the IS attack on an Istanbul nightclub on 1 January 2017, the Turkish cabinet alleged that the attack was probably a reaction to the Russian-Turkish ceasefire for Syria, because it had marginalised the US on the Syrian issue.

This conception manifests itself in Turkey's policy on NATO and the EU. Whilst the Turkish government has assured NATO of its loyalty, it has also emphasised its determination to continue cooperating with Moscow in military and defence policy and consider purchasing Russian S400 anti-ballistic missiles. Ankara and Moscow also intend to introduce a joint mechanism for military and intelligence cooperation. Turkish think tanks have debated the pros and cons of remaining in NATO, and some clearly favour leaving.

In November 2015 the Turkish President "threatened" the EU with holding a referendum on breaking off the accession talks. That same month he declared – and not for the first time – that Turkey would be better off in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) than in the EU.

Turkey is increasingly attractive to the SCO, and in particular Russia. Conversely, the SCO's importance for Turkey is growing, especially for Erdoğan. When he first voiced the possibility of Turkey's membership in the SCO in January 2013, Russia was not yet militarily active in Syria, and Turkey seemed firmly anchored in the West. Since then, Ankara has become part of Russia's strategy for the Middle East and an important lever for weakening the West. In early 2013, however, four months before the Gezi protests, the West did not yet view Erdoğan exclusively as a symbol of authoritarianism; Ankara was preparing to hold peace talks with the PKK; Erdoğan was not yet a president wanting to change the constitution to shore up his own power; and he had not had to survive a putsch attempt. The relatively democratic Turkey of that time did not consider the SCO's basic principle – mutual non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member states – to be quite as essential for its government as today.

In other words, current dynamics in Turkey's foreign policy do not clearly indicate whether it will remain a part of the West's security system. How about domestic policy?

Unanswered questions about the attempted putsch

Two topics currently define the front lines of Turkey's domestic policy: the evaluation of the attempted coup d'état of 15 July 2016, and the constitutional change being pushed through by the government with all its might.

There is agreement both in the country and among political parties that the attempted putsch was carried out by a net-

work of officers that had got to know each other via the movement of the preacher Fethullah Gülen. However, that is the sum total of the consensus. The chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, talks of a "controlled putsch attempt", by the government. He is referring to news reports which suggest that the government saw the putsch attempt coming and allowed it to take place so as to legitimise its "counter-putsch" (in Kılıçdaroğlu's expression). One of the cornerstones of this thesis is that, eight hours before the putsch, a major in the Turkish armed forces personally sought out the secret service (controlled by Erdoğan's closest confidante) and informed it that the initiative had been launched. The officer was presented to the head of the secret service, who then went to see the chief of general staff. However, the head of the secret service claims not to have informed the heads of state or government, nor did the chief of general staff give the commanders-in-chief of the services branches unequivocal orders.

All this occurred despite the fact that, in those weeks, Ankara was expecting a coup attempt by officers close to Gülen. Some three months previously, a newspaper close to the government had published two articles by a journalist who boasted of good contacts in the secret service. He warned officers in the military who were close to Gülen that the secret service was aware of their plans and only waiting for them to become active and thus reveal the structure of their network. Another newspaper close to the government declared only three days before the putsch that around 600 officers close to Gülen would be removed from the army as part of the next round of promotions in August. It is unclear whether the government did in fact deliberately allow the putsch to take place, thus accepting the deaths of around 240 people during the fighting on the night of the putsch. The offices of a rightwing opposition newspaper that employs a journalist who had publicly defended this theory was attacked a few days later by masked rioters. The commis-

sion set up by the Turkish parliament to investigate the putsch was prevented by ruling-party delegates from questioning imprisoned generals or summoning the head of the secret service or the chief of general staff. Instead, the commission has been concentrating on the relationship between the Gülenists and the US. In a speech in the first week of January, Erdoğan did not baulk at repeating an obviously false report, just to put responsibility for the putsch back on Washington.

Constitutional Change to Preserve the Status Quo

Without the parliamentary faction of the extreme rightwing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the ruling party will not get its bill on constitutional change approved by parliament. The MHP chairman Devlet Bahçeli has justified his support by saying that, since President Erdoğan is overstepping the competences granted to him under the existing constitution, the constitution would have to be adapted to the actual circumstances. Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ also favours the constitutional change to perpetuate the current situation. He readily admits that Erdoğan already has a decisive influence on the executive and legislative because of his high approval rate among the population. But since leaders as charismatic as Erdoğan were rare, he added, the conservatives needed a presidential system because only the runoff between two candidates provided by a presidential system could ensure that the successful candidate would always come from the conservative bloc, which enjoys a relative majority in Turkish society. This is needed to codify the conservatives' predominance in the future. Opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu likewise regards the cementing of the current balance of power as the true goal of the constitutional change that is being sought, though his appraisal of it is diametrically opposed. For him, the change is intended to formally and legally turn the "counter-putsch" carried out by the govern-

ment on 20 July when it declared a state of emergency (which has so far been extended twice) into the new normal; remove the division of powers; and finally do away with the already badly damaged state of law.

The bill to change the constitution confirms the hopes of its supporters and thus also the fears of its opponents. If modified in line with the bill, the constitution would weaken the parliament vis-à-vis the president. He could dissolve it at any time and set the date for new elections; nominate ministers, secretaries of state and the heads of all administrations by himself; declare a state of emergency; and, in that scenario, rule using emergency decrees. Parliament would lose the right to question the executive directly and could no longer block its policies by refusing to adopt the budget. Moreover, since the president could remain both a member and the chairman of his party, he would also be in a position to dominate the policies of the most powerful parliamentary party, which would give him significant influence over the legislative. And since the president and parliament together appoint around half of the judiciary, a president who is also party chairman could in future select half of all judges.

The bill was adopted at its first and second readings in January. It will be put to a referendum at the earliest on 26 March, at the latest on 16 April. What is the popular mood on the topic?

The attitude of the population

According to a recent poll, only a fifth of the population feels well-informed about the content of the constitutional change. This might explain why different pollsters receive such different answers when asking whether those surveyed agree with or reject the bill. What is certain, however, is that there is broad agreement with the state of emergency being declared and extended: about two-thirds of those polled endorse it. Around two-thirds also trust the government and its security policy. This closing of ranks shows that the government's anti-

West rhetoric has been falling on fertile ground. Forty-four percent of those polled thus accept at face value the claims made by Erdoğan and his government that the West had a negative or even hostile attitude towards Turkey and that foreign countries (in the West) were ultimately responsible for all terrorist attacks in Turkey. About the same percentage would welcome breaking off the EU accession talks, and 87 percent agree with the rapprochement with Russia. Even before the attempted putsch, only 38 percent considered a continued NATO membership to be necessary. That percentage has likely sunk further, given the widespread suspicions that NATO had prior knowledge of the coup. Turkey is taking giant steps away from Europe in its domestic policy as well.

Customs Union and Red Lines

And yet the EU remains by far the most important market for Turkish exports. Between 2012 and 2015, its share of Turkish exports rose from 39 to 44 percent. In 2015, 57.6 percent of direct foreign investment in Turkey and two-thirds of all foreign holdings in Turkish firms came from EU countries. In November 2016, former Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, who is now one of the Prime Minister's deputies, warned that turning its back on the EU was demoting Turkey to a third-world country. His warning was triggered by the stagnation in domestic investment and the drop in foreign investment from 10.5 bn. US dollars in the first half of 2015 to 4.8 bn. in the same period in 2016. Because of its growing population and the entry into the labour market of baby-boom generations, Turkey has neither managed to raise its pro-capita income (on a US dollar basis) nor to reduce its unemployment rate, despite average annual growth of about 3.7 percent in the past few years.

Economically speaking, neither of the great economic powers in the SCO, Russia or China, is an alternative to the EU for Turkey either currently or in the long term.

In 2015 Turkey posted a negative trade deficit with both Russia (minus 16.8 percent) and China (minus 22.5 percent).

From a strategic perspective, it is unclear how, without NATO backing, Turkey intends to counter Russia's power projection in the Black Sea, Caucasus and Middle East. Breaking with the West is therefore neither good economic nor good strategic sense.

However, the West cannot rely on Ankara to share this view of Turkish interests. To keep Turkey part of West, the EU should make some concessions to Ankara, for instance on the upcoming negotiations on the customs union or the visa exemption for Turkish citizens. However, these concessions must be linked to red lines, such as the re-introduction of the death penalty and torture.

To be heard in Ankara, not just the EU but NATO as well must speak with one voice. In addition, NATO must extricate itself from the tight spot between Turks and Kurds in Syria into which Washington has manoeuvred it.

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